

Two students killed in Australian university shooting

Margaret Rees
29 October 2002

Two fourth year honours commerce students were killed and five other people wounded, when a student suddenly opened fire in a classroom at Melbourne's Monash University on October 21. The tragedy occurred at the beginning of an econometrics tutorial on the sixth floor of the Menzies building at the suburban Clayton campus. It points to a growing crisis within Australia's tertiary education system, which is creating profound social tensions that remain totally unaddressed.

As bullets sprayed around the room, Professor Lee Gordon-Brown, who was teaching the class, leapt forward to grapple with the gunman. He was joined by one of the final year students, Alistair Boast, and between them they managed to overcome the assailant. Another professor from a nearby classroom, Brett Inder, heard the shooting, and rushed to their aid. Gordon-Brown was shot several times and collapsed. Inder disarmed the gunman, who had a total of five handguns, then stayed with him, trying to calm him down until security arrived. At the same time he helped organise medical assistance for the wounded to stop their bleeding.

Ambulance officers praised the quick thinking of the professors and students, pointing out that their actions had prevented far greater loss of life. The two students killed were Steven Chan, 26 and Xu Hui William Wu, 26, an overseas student from Hong Kong. Those shot and wounded as well as Gordon-Brown were students Laurie Brown, Daniel Urbach, Christine Young and Leigh Huynh. Several received multiple gunshot wounds.

Police arrested the alleged gunman Huan Yun Xiang, 36, and took him for questioning. Next day in Melbourne Magistrates Court he faced two charges of murder and five of attempted murder. Aided by a Cantonese interpreter, he did not apply for bail and was not required to plead.

Xiang, a mature age student at Monash University who has permanent residency in Australia, was known to the students and lecturer in the class as a loner who always sat somewhat apart. Inder told the media: "I can't say much about the allegations that have been made but I know the person I was holding down. I know that he is a committed student, a hard-working student, a very intelligent student. But there's probably also some deep concerns for his welfare that I would have."

Xiang was an honours student, about to complete his fourth and final year. He lived close to the university with his mother in a spartan block of flats. On the morning of the shootings, he left behind a note about his intentions, then proceeded to the tutorial where he was to present an oral dissertation. He had evidently postponed this until the last date possible before university classes ended and final examinations began.

There is limited knowledge of Xiang's history. It is not clear what his financial situation was, if he was supported by his family or had worked before enrolling at university. He shared an unfurnished, inexpensive, rented flat with his mother but had found the money to buy seven handguns obtained legally through a Sporting Shooters Association.

Ruwan Bandara, an overseas student living in the flat below Xiang and his mother told WSWS that he was "very surprised" to hear about the shooting. Xiang was "a very quiet, friendly guy. When he talked he was smiling and friendly." Bandara noted, however, that Xiang had problems communicating in English. "We spoke about pushing his car to the garage. We couldn't understand what he said."

Other residents described him as very quiet, but frustrated with his inability to make himself understood in English, which was clearly preying on his mind.

Because of his language difficulties, Xiang's final oral dissertation was a high stakes requirement that he had no chance of fulfilling. The almost certain outcome was failure. For overseas students, failing a course can result in deportation. For those with permanent residency like Xiang, it can still mean personal disaster. There are few job prospects for Asian workers with poor English language skills, except unskilled factory work. Yet he would still be required to repay his accrued university fees through HECS—the Higher Education Contribution Scheme.

Whatever mental health and other problems Xiang must have suffered—and which appear to have been undiagnosed and untreated—the pressure associated with looming failure seems to have been what caused him to snap.

Liz Thompson, from the Monash Students Association, spoke to WSWS about the high number of students failed quite late in their studies. "Somebody from the Student Association tries to represent these students at the hearings where they appeal

against their exclusion from university. The great majority of them are international students, and exclusion is almost always over their English language proficiency.

“That’s who we see at exclusion hearings. They are international students, who are extremely bright. But with the oral presentations, that is when it is discovered that they haven’t got the English language capabilities. Often they are in the business/ economics faculty. It is often not getting picked up until second or third year—and there are substantial numbers.

“These students get a letter saying they’re at risk of failing. Here at Monash, unlike at RMIT [Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology] University, the letter does not include any advice with the number of the student union where they can get some representation. At RMIT there has been a fight to make sure that advice is included in the letter. Here, we’ve been looking at obtaining something similar for months.”

Asked about the provision of back up English language facilities for students of non-English speaking background (NESB) at Monash, Thompson indicated that while there is a Language and Learning Service, the pressure on such services had intensified enormously with the rapid increase in the international student population.

The education of international students has become Australia’s third biggest service industry in terms of overseas income, increasing by an extraordinary 75 percent since 1996 and now worth close to \$4 billion per year. By enrolments, Monash is Australia’s largest university, with eight campuses, including one in Malaysia and one in Johannesburg, South Africa. International agents operate from China to countries such as Fiji, aggressively seeking international enrolments. Of the student body, 25.6 percent consists of overseas students, up from 12 percent just two years ago. But support services, including language facilities, have totally failed to keep up with the influx.

The *Sydney Morning Herald* reported in July that the federal government had been deluged with complaints from academics that classes of students from non-English speaking backgrounds had become almost impossible to teach. The universities’ desperation for full fee paying students had led to indiscriminate enrolments, regardless of the capacity of students to understand or participate in their classes. Business/Commerce and computing courses were the most seriously affected.

Cutbacks in government funding have made it impossible for the universities to provide the necessary back-up facilities. Phong Nguyen, director of the Indo-Chinese Association in Melbourne told ABC radio after the shootings: “We have to look seriously at how our universities support overseas students.” He said that, out of “this tragic accident...Monash University and all other universities that take a lot of overseas students, and in fact rely on overseas students (for funds) have to be seriously looked at. How much pressure are they under to take overseas students regardless of their ability? Then students

are here, and the universities do not support them enough. The universities take their money, but do not support them.”

Mike Puleston, a former university language centre teacher, who wrote to the *Melbourne Age* after Xiang appeared in court, explained to WSW: “There are few situations more stressful than that of being an overseas student, trying to operate in a strange culture, with the heavy weight of family expectation upon one.” He added: “I should mention too, that the suicides of overseas students—usually caused by unbearable stress—are rarely reported in the media.”

A similar tragedy occurred at Latrobe University, another Melbourne campus, three years ago when an honours student started shooting in a campus restaurant. The restaurant manager, who had earlier fired the student from a part-time job, was killed and other patrons wounded before the young man was overwhelmed.

Over two thousand students attended a memorial ceremony at Monash University last Friday, where the families of Steven Chan and Xu Hui William Wu were posthumously presented with their sons’ honours degrees. The overwhelming reaction was grief, combined with a sense of concern over what could have caused such a tragedy.

But the response of the mass media and politicians has been entirely different. Ignoring any of the social and educational issues so obviously involved, they have immediately focused on law and order: strengthening guns laws, limiting availability of hand guns, reviewing security procedures on campuses, etc. The official establishment would prefer to avoid any probing into how and why contemporary Australian society has become a breeding ground for the type of insanity involved in such indiscriminate acts of violence.



To contact the WSW and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact